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W. R. H.

A

Thesis

upon

The art of preserving Health

by

Robert E. Peyton

of Fauquier County

Virginia.

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No 21 Robert L. Peyton
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# The Art of Preserving Health.

This is a subject that admits of almost unlimited range; of course too much so to be minutely treated in a thesis. But from a student more than general principles is hardly to be expected, at least in the majority of cases. It would be unavailing in one whose opportunities of practice have been extremely limited to attempt an improved history of any one disease, or to offer a new theory which he has not been able to put to the test of experience. He could but transcribe, the writings of others, unable in mooted points to give a well grounded decision.

My subject may be divided into, 1, the regulation of diet; 2, the regulation of clothing; 3, the regulation of the general habits of life.

Error in diet is perhaps the most common cause of ill health. It commences often at the birth and continues through life. Children who

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have the misfortune not to be supplied with food from their mother's breast, or when that food is of unhealthy kind from some peculiarity or disease in the mother, are very liable to suffer from this cause. From the ignorance & officiousness of friends and nurses, they are not only fed with improper articles, but these are crammed down their throats in such excessive quantities that the stomach becomes unnaturally distended, its tone is destroyed and secretions rendered morbid. The bowels soon partake of this condition, and in a short time a wretched train of symptoms follow which place their victim in a situation that the most skilful practitioner often finds a difficulty in relieving.

To avoid this state of things every mother who is capable should suckle her own offspring, provided the unhealthiness of her milk does not forbid it. But if she be unable, or

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if her milk be of bad quality, the best substitute is new cow's milk with the addition of a little water and loaf sugar.

The powerful effect of disease in the mother upon the health of the child, through the medium of the milk, is often astonishing. There is a lady in my own neighbourhood subject to spasms, who has lost two infants with the most violent fits, attributed by the physician to her suckling them immediately after an attack of spasm. Violent passions of the mind, as joy, grief, terror, and a too grosp or stimulating diet in the parent or nurse are all prejudicial to the health of the sucking child, and should be carefully avoided.

It is a fault common to the young, the adult, and the aged to over-eat themselves. In hearty young persons who take a great deal of exercise, this is not often of immediate

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physical inconvenience, further than causing a degree of stupid inactivity during the oppression of a full stomach. But in a moral point of view, even in those favorable instances, the subject well deserves the attention of parents and guardians, and I feel covinced that much might be done, that is now usually neglected, by early endeavouring to establish correct habits in this respect.

The majority of the diseases of young persons, however, are owing to imprudence in eating, and one particularly, which I shall mention, proceeding from a load of indigestible matter in the stomach. It is an almost entire suspension of animation; the child suddenly falling down as if lifeless, the muscles remaining relaxed, and the body perfectly flaccid, pulse imperceptible, or very weak, and the respiration nearly in

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the same situation. This case frequently confounds ignorant or injudicious practitioners, who mistaking it for extreme nervous debility, are led to the use of diffusible stimuli, whereas vomiting is perhaps the only remedy, and this should be excited as soon as possible by tickling the fauces with a feather. Sometimes the same cause gives rise to violent spasms which are vainly attempted to be relieved by bleeding. The belly-ache, dysentery, and cholera-morbus are all frequently induced in children by eating improperly, and by nothing oftener than unripe fruit. It is the exciting cause moreover to many other diseases without which perhaps they would not occur; and this particularly suggests a caution during the prevalence of any epidemic.

By a well regulated authority, by a due employment of body and mind, (for children often

seek to relieve the ennui of idleness with eating,) and by precept and example instilling into them the importance, both as to the present and the future, of avoiding to eat too much or too often, many hours of anxiety would be saved to parents, and many days of sickness to their offspring.

I confess it is much easier to theorize than to practise successfully in the case before us, as there is always great difficulty in enforcing disagreable regulations, even in persons of a more rational age.

A great evil resulting from this early acquired bad habit is its effects upon future life. We seldom meet with a young man studying a profession who is not dyspeptic, which arises from his retaining a good appetite after habits of exercise are laid aside. A confirmed dyspepsia, (to say nothing of the various other diseases which have

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their origin or predisposition from the same cause) is a most troublesome disease, and is apt to continue through life unless corrected by an entire change of habits, and if not duly attended to not only destroys the vigour of the body, but also that of the mind.

For one accustomed to a luxurious or an abundant table, spread every day with a variety of meats & vegetables, & not sparing in drinks, and who takes his seat with a morbidly increased appetite, it is certainly very hard to confine himself within the limits of prudence. In spite of resolutions made, perhaps, six times every day, he eats first of this dish, then of that, drinks glass after glass unconscious of the load he is heaping upon himself, until a short time after he has risen from the table, when he feels oppressed & engorged - his stomach seems to be distended with wind, of which he is constantly, though

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in vain, endeavouring to relieve himself with difficulty he performs respiration - feels incapable of exertion of any kind - becomes peevish and fretful and despondent - reproaches himself with digging his grave with his teeth, and in the anguish of his heart curses the fate that entrals him to so wretched an existence. Inflammations of the stomach and bowels, or of the liver, or lungs supervene: or the unfortunate victim is suddenly and unexpectedly seized with fits of violent spasms and convulsions, or with a species of apoplexy which may carry him off in a very short time unlep proper aid is afforded. When the last mentioned affections follow directly a full meal, vomiting should be immediately resorted to, as without it all other means will prove abortive. I mention this because many practitioners are in the habit in such cases, not understanding their cause, of depending mainly and prima-

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rily upon the lancet, which is entirely useless until the stomach is relieved.
I have known hearty men, who were of full habit, to be taken off after an abundant meal with but a moments warning.
Sometimes however, the ill effects of luxurious living is of more protracted but not less painful nature - as headaches - gout, angina - pectoris (now thought by some a species of gout) and nephritic complaints.
Carefully avoiding to eat more than the stomach will duly digest - selecting from experience the most digestible articles - observing regular habits of exercise, and proportioning the quantity and kind of food to the exerise taken, are the only methods by which these derangements can be prevented, and their only radical means of cure when once confirmed.
We are told to leave the table with an appetite; this is certainly a precept that most persons would find very difficult to practise, whilst others might carry it so far as to produce the

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very evil they intended to prevent. A better one perhaps is given by an eminent modern writer, and that is to watch closely for the moment when we no longer eat to satisfy the calls of hunger, but merely for the gratification of the palate. We should then stop, as the stomach has received its proper burthen. Another important rule is to eat slowly and chew well what we eat, as we thereby aid the powers of the stomach, and give it better opportunity of making its reports. As to the articles of diet that are proper or improper, each one's experience is his best guide. No general rules upon the subject can be given.

A strict attention to diet during convalescence, from any severe disease more particularly, is of the most vital importance, but is very apt to be neglected by practitioners, or mismanaged by attendants. From a few unfortunate mouthsfull the physician may see all his

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labour frustrated. The lightness and sparenes of the food should be proportioned to the debility of the patient, and his disposition to febrile excitement. Sometimes a more nourishing and even a stimulating diet may be necessary; but of this the practitioner must judge from the circumstances of the case.

Regimen may be carried too far however, for if the patient be allowed less than the recovering tone of his system will properly assimilate, a feverish irritation may be excited, which not only retards recovery, but being misunderstood and treated with active measures, would give rise to very disagreable consequences. To avoid either extreme, the nourishment should be given in small quantities & repeated agreably to its effects and the desires of the patient. The judicious administration of a little nourishment, such as milk and water or light broth, even during the exis-

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tence of febrile diseases, I have frequently seen productive of the happiest effects; relieving a great deal of suffering, and eliciting from the patient the most grateful expressions, and perhaps finally composing him to rest.

The proper regulation of clothing is another very important mean of preserving health. The body should always be so clad as to be preserved of a natural temperature - it must therefore be defended against the cold of winter, and the heat of summer - in other words we must prevent the capillary action of the surface being suppressed by the former, or too highly excited by the latter.

The ill effects of the suppression of the capillary action are congestions in the internal organs, which if not relieved by the succeeding reaction, end in inflammations; or the reaction itself by its severity and continuance may cause inflammation in parts predisposed

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Warm clothing in hot weather may do injury from previously exhausting the body by excessive perspiration, and thereby it becomes debilitated and irritable, and consequently more liable to the impression of cold when exposed. From the same cause cutaneous eruptions are sometimes excited in particular habits, either on account of the acridness of the perspiration or from the irritation produced. Infants are more particularly liable to suffer in this way. Too warm clothing is not a very common fault however, and I believe in this climate at least, but little injury is sustained from it.

It will be sufficient for me to confine my observations upon clothing as a preventitive of disease, principally to the use of flannel next the skin. Persons of robust health and constitution, who are not peculiarly exposed,

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may not feel the want of it; (and, until there is some reason for the contrary, should avoid it;) but to the weak and those predisposed to certain diseases, as rheumatism, and affections of the pulmonary organs – to those exposed to miasmatic districts, or to the chilling dews of the autumnal season – to those whose fate it may be to labour at all times & seasons in the open air, exposed, when exhausted by perspiration & fatigue, to the incidental changes of the atmosphere, I should immagine it to be a valuable & indispensable protection. By its non-conducting power it prevents the ill effects of cold and moisture, and by keeping up a healthy action on the skin, wards off the diseases above mentioned.

An attack of bilious fever I have known to be prevented in the case of a person who constantly suffered, until he adopted the plan

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of wearing flannel throughout the summer & fall: since then he has entirely ceased. Would it not be advisable for those subject to annual attacks of this fever, together with other preventitive measures, to wear it constantly? Young practitioners of medicine going to southern countries in pursuit of fortune, should be particularly careful to endeavour to screen themselves by its use from the very dangerous effects of the night dews. Inhabitants of northern climes, and more especially those who are natives of the south, may avail themselves of it to prevent the pulmonary complaints so common in those regions. Some are unable to use flannel; such will find a very pleasant and efficacious substitute in soft buckskin.

Most persons who are in the habit of wearing flannel next the skin, keep it on constantly day and night for a fortnight, if not longer. It is advised by some, and I think with great reason,

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to be taken off every night and resumed again in the morning. There is no necessity for it during the night, the body being sufficiently warm without it - it is preserved from the effects of the perspiration which injures its non-conducting & tonic properties; and when put on dry in the morning, the comfortable sensations experienced from it are much more striking.
It should be washed at least once a fortnight, & in the case of those who perspire freely, or take much exercise, it should be washed oftener.
When flannel is taken off in consequence of the warm weather of summer, the system is left very sensible to any sudden change in the atmosphere, and serious accidents have happened from this cause. To beware of them all kinds of exposure must be carefully avoided, particularly at first, and it should be resumed if the weather becomes cool & is likely to continue unfavorable for any

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length of time. Some are in the habit of undergoing this change very gradually; wearing during the winter cotton and flannel, and substituting linen for the former in the spring. When the weather becomes warmer they wear cotton alone, and finally linen alone. Should a change take place in the atmosphere they resume the cotton &c, as circumstances may suggest.

I come now to the third part of my subject, namely, the regulation of the general habits of life.

Persons who pursue their immediate gratification, regardless of present or future consequences; who, to the calls of their sensual appetites, make a sacrifice of prudence, morality and religion, must consent to bid farewell, not only to the comforts of health, but also to peace of mind, which is ever essential to the well being of the body. Were I now addressing myself to

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such, I should deem my time and labour thrown away; for how often when but just saved, as if by providential interference from the effects of an irregular course of life, do they slight the advice and solemn warning of the most respectable physicians, until at last death puts a period to their miserable existence.

As a general rule, any habit that operates as a strain upon nature - that every day strikes a blow at her root, must sooner or later overcome the firmness of the constitution; and the sooner because those habits increase generally in a geometrical ratio, whilst in the same ratio the system is undermined. On the contrary habits which every day tend to invigorate the natural powers, will finally give strength and firmness to weak constitutions. Drunkenness - the use of tobacco, or any other anodyne drug - sitting all night at the ga-

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ming table, gluttony, excess of venery, too great and constant application to business of any kind, a sedentary life, all come under the former head - whilst avoiding the above excesses, a due attention to the daily exercise of both body and mind, and to such other habits as the delicacy or peculiarity of the constitution requires, comprehend the latter.

There are persons who cannot drink, day after day, with impunity a single glass of wine even; they must then deny themselves a momentary enjoyment, to prevent a more lasting inconvenience.

Some have particular customs which they observe with the most rigid uniformity and which were first adopted not from any necessity, but merely in consistence with preconceived opinions. Now though their effects at first are often very delightful, and

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they appear to promise a great deal, ultimately they may be injurious; yet the system becomes so wedded to them, that though to continue them is dangerous, to lay them aside is equally so. Those, for instance, who have by nature, weak stomachs may find the occasional use of tonics of advantage, but their constant employment would destroy the tone of the healthiest stomach. Some injure themselves by the practise of taking medicines or being bled for every imaginary indisposition or at set times of the year, until a habit is acquired. There is no drug more certain nor effectual, nor which more agreably repays the physician, when properly administered, whether in the cure or prevention of diseases, than opium, yet who is so wretched or so completely a slave as the habitual opium eater? Whilst therefore we are particular in our general habits, we should

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avoid acquiring those that are unnecessary, and that make just so many pregnable points through which the system is liable to attack. On the contrary we should endeavour to harden the constitution by exposing it as far as it can bear. The use of the cold bath in the morning is an excellent method of invigorating the body, and shielding it against disease. But would it not be better to employ it irregularly, as three, four, five and six times a week alternately; omitting sometimes one, sometimes two, three or four mornings in succession, so as to obtain its good effects and at the same time avoid a constant practice? I consider a daily habit in this and similar cases objectionable, because circumstances often intervene in spite of us, to prevent its observance, causing a great deal of uncomfortable feeling, if not suffering of a more serious nature. I knew a young gentleman who every morning, when it was in his

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power, as soon as he left his bed, plunged himself naked into a tub of cold water. And this he did for the purpose of preventing colds; but he declared if prevented from enjoying this luxury his feelings were very disagreable for that day, and generally a violent cold was the result. We should not sedulously shield ourselves from cold and damp, but on the contrary should undergo as much as the system will bear without danger, by which it is gradually enabled to endure more. Nor should we be overnice in our hours of eating, drinking, or sleeping, for reasons that are stated above. A man moreover should scorn to make himself a piece of Clock-Work, and pass his life "in one dull round." I mean these observations to apply to the young and healthy; of course enfeebled old age, or sickness calls for different treatment.

Doctor Armstrong recommends persons who are predisposed to pulmonary complaints to wash the

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breast and body every morning in cold water, to wear flannel next the skin, and to accustom themselves to laborious exercise &c, and mentions that such, even when apparently in a decline, have been entirely restored and made robust men by hard labour.

I will now make a few remarks concerning the means of warding off threatened attacks of illness and of preserving the health during the rage of an epidemic. In most instances preceeding actual confinement by sickness, there are premonitory symptoms lasting a longer or shorter time, with which the patient still keeps about his business in hopes every day of being better. I have known persons to continue in this way for a week or more without doing any thing for their relief, and ultimately to be seized with the most violent symptoms. This frequently happens during the fall epidemic of our Country, and it is during this period that mild preventitive measures will effect in a short time, what, after a little more

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delay, the utmost skill of the Physician may fail to do in many weeks. I do not intend to recommend taking medicine for every slight indisposition; but it is not difficult for one who has had a little experience, to distinguish cases which are likely to grow worse, if neglected, from those that are capable of spontaneous cure.

The most common causes of slight indisposition are excess in eating, exposure to heat or cold, or the miasmata of the autumnal season. In incipient catarrh, Dr Physick recommends bathing the feet in warm water and a small dose of laudanum or opium just before going to bed. I have never tried this practice, but doubt not of its efficacy if adopted in time; if it be too late for its application, a gentle laxative, warm drinks, abstinence, & confinement to the house, or even in bed, for a few days, will generally restore the patient, and prevent the serious accidents

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that often arise from neglected colds. When the other causes operate the symptoms are generally languor, a sense of fullness & oppression, with a slight headache and vertigo upon stooping &c. In these cases when abstinence alone would not do I have often used one or two pills made of equal parts of calomel aloes & Jalap with the happiest effects. They operate effectually and without producing nausea or distress; and if taken the night before the patient will frequently awake in the morning with no other trace of his indisposition than a lax state of the bowels. Should the headache be more violent, bleeding will be necessary, or if it arise from accidental disorder of the stomach, I have thought it to have been sometimes very effectually relieved by a simple pill of aloes.

By these means, simple as they may appear, I have so often seen arrested in my own person and

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in the persons of friends, symptoms, which neglected in others have given rise to long and dangerous illness, and not unfrequently terminated in death, that I have thought myself by the advantage thus possessed, alone, almost remunerated for the labor and expense of my profession.

Even in the midst of a violent epidemic, the health may in many cases be preserved by proper management. In this situation all excess in eating and drinking should be carefully avoided; yet persons who have been in the habit of eating heartily shd not suddenly diminish their accustomed quantity, nor should those in the habit of drinking take less than their usual allowance, as long as they find their health undisturbed. Exposure to heat, or cold or to the night air, extraordinary exertions of body or mind, or in short any thing that may make a decided impression upon the system and prove an exciting cause to the contagion, must be guarded against. The slightest evidence of an attack

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In evidence of the above statement I may quote the venerable Cornaro, Rush &c and more lately there is an account of a family which preserved its own health and that of many others by these means, amidst the devastation of one of the most violent fevers.

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